

UNSOCIAL SOCIABILITY AND OUR PREDISPOSITION TO GOODNESS: KANTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Arup Jyoti Sharma

Abstract

In this paper, I shall expound Kant's opinion about unsocial sociability and our predisposition to goodness through establishing an ethical community. Human nature, according to Kant, is predisposed to competition with other people, getting one's way despite the will of others, and rising to a higher rank or status in the eyes of others. This inclination of human nature is known by Kant as unsocial sociability. It is also known as a 'radical evil,' denoting that within this basic relation of interdependency, there is a tendency to act in an unsociable manner, cross others, and isolate oneself from them at the same time as being dependent on them. With this 'unsocial sociability,' we aim to dominate others with wealth, honour, and power. Kant identified these three things as features of human tendencies that are hard for us to subdue with reason. People make themselves sad and evil when they strive to be better than others. However, in the process, they acquire skills that benefit both human nature and human history and are passed on to subsequent generations.

Keywords: *Unsociable sociability, ecclesiastical faith, reasoned hope, Church, goodness*

Introduction

In this paper, I shall discuss Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) account of "unsocial sociability" or "the propensity to radical evil in human nature," which are means to state our dependency as well as moral imperfection. Kant first makes the case for human beings' sociability in an antisocial way in his "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim." In the introduction to this essay, Kant gives an affirmation to his rational comprehension of humans, in so far as he states that "human beings, in their endeavors, do not behave merely instinctively, like animals," but he also recognizes that humans also do not "on the whole [act] like rational citizens of the world in accordance with an agreed upon plan..."¹ These remarks highlight the reality that it is very challenging to construct a cogent story of human events causing human

¹ Amélie Oksenberg Rorty and James Schmidt, (2009), (eds.), *Kant's Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim: A Critical Guide*, (New York: Cambridge University Press), p.10 [8:17].

freedom and irrationality. In his essay, Kant attempts to show how, despite their foolishness, people can still nurture because of their inherent nature. Kant states at the outset of his argument that the reason each and every living thing has special, species-specific capacities is our unique potential. He claims that an individual cannot fully develop reason; it can only occur in a species.² Kant then finds what he takes to be how nature stimulates such progress, specifically, “antagonism” among humans in society, which he asserts ends up inspiring the human efforts to create lawful order and peaceful living between themselves. Kant describes this antagonism “unsocial sociability,” by which he means humans’ “propensity to enter into society, which, however, is combined with a thoroughgoing resistance that constantly threatens to break up this society.”³ He continues, “The human being has an inclination to become *socialized*, since in such a condition he feels himself as more a human being, i.e., feels the development of his natural predispositions. But he also has a great propensity to *individualize* (isolate) himself, because he simultaneously encounters in himself the unsociable property of willing to direct everything so as to get his own way, and hence expects resistance everywhere because he knows of himself that he inclined on his side toward resistance against others.”⁴

In this paper, I shall explicate Kant’s opinion about unsocial sociability or radical evil and the predisposition to goodness by establishing an ethical community. For the sake of precision, I have divided this paper into the following parts. In PartI, I shall explain in detail unsocial sociability. In PartII, I shall deal with Kant’s exploration of the need for an ethical community and our reasoned hopes. In PartIII, the role of the Church and the Ecclesiastical Faith are expounded in detail.

Part-I

Evil and Sociability

As we have already discussed that unsocial sociability or radical evil is an instinctive and natural tendency of human nature, a tendency to capsize the moral order of incentives in the maxim of action. This tendency is not itself a natural inclination, nor is it a characteristic of these inclinations themselves. As such, this tendencyabolishes the ground of all maxims and founds radical evil in human nature. In saying that the propensity to radical evil in man destroys the ground of all maxims, Kant does not mean that on account of it, all our maxims are evil, but rather only that there exists, *antecedently* to our every adoption of a good or evil maxim, a tendency to prefer the

² *Ibid.*, p. 11 [8:18-19].

³ *Ibid.*, P.13 [8:20].

⁴ *Ibid.*, P.13 [8:20-21].

incentives of inclination to those of duty. Because extirpation could only occur through good maxims and can't occur when the fundamental subjective ground of all maxims is imagined as corrupt, Kant claims that radical evil is 'inextirpable'⁵ by human forces. Human nature's predisposition toward radical evil does not imply that people always follow bad morals or are morally deficient in general. Rather, it only states that we must assume a 'wickedness of the will' in the shape of an inclination toward evil and start with a constant counteraction against it in order to begin our moral endeavors. We do not start from a 'natural innocence.'

Kant's exposition of the tendency to radical evil in human nature can be found in Book One of the "*Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*". According to Kant, the human will be presented with two different kinds of incentives: incentives of reason, which allude to our dignity as independent, reasoning beings, and incentives of inclination, which point to our innate desires. In particular, when these rational incentives assume the shape of moral imperatives that are objectively true, the later incentives always have rational precedence over the former. However, Kant also maintains that humans have an inbuilt tendency to opt out of the logical hierarchy of these incentives, favoring incentives based on inclination over reason and empirical desires over duty-based reasoning.⁶ Kant describes this propensity the unsocial sociability or "radical" evil in human nature, means that "evil can be predicated of man as a species; not that such a quality can be inferred from the concept of his species (that is, of man in general)-for then it would be necessary; but rather that from what we know of man through experience we cannot judge otherwise of him, or, that we may presuppose evil to be subjectively necessary to every man, even to the best. Now this propensity must itself be considered as morally evil...and as we must, after all, ever hold man himself responsible for it, we can further call it a radical innate evil in human nature..."⁷

This can be seen in two smaller forms: 'fragility' (the propensity to break the moral standards we have adopted) and 'impurity,' in addition to the more obvious expression of 'depravity,' which is the direct preference of instinctive impulses over reasoned ideals (the requirement for actual incentives to follow reason's orders).⁸ It is evident in the "bestial" vices of gluttony, inebriation, and untamed behavior as well as

⁵ Allen W. Wood, (1970), *Kant's Moral Religion*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press), pp. 113-14.

⁶ Immanuel Kant, (1793), *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, translated by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt. H. Hudson, from *The Philosophy of Kant*, edited with an Introduction by Carl J. Friedrich, (New York: The Modern Library, 1977), Book One, Part II, p.376.

⁷ *Ibid*, Part III, pp.379-80.

⁸ *Ibid*, p.376.

the coarse vices of cruelty and brutality toward other people.⁹ However, it also present, perhaps even more so, in the better-kept ‘civilized’ vices that are brought on by human rivalry and jealousy, such as enmity, ingratitude, dishonesty, and malevolent gloating over the bad luck of others.¹⁰

Kant differentiates three “predispositions” in human nature, which are considered to be good in themselves¹¹:

(1) Animality—the origin of our innate urges for both social interaction and the survival of the individual as well as the species;

(2) Humanity—the foundation of our ability to define goals based on logic and to accept the culmination of our impulses as a complete goal known as ‘happiness’; and

(3) Personality—the basis of our moral accountability—the capacity to make and abide by laws solely via reason.

These three predispositions are good in themselves. We have discovered, nevertheless, that two of them are likewise incapable of becoming the origin of evil. Even if animality may have vices grafted onto it, animality cannot be the genesis of these vices because evil is derived by comparing incentives and choosing one over the other—instinctive impulses alone. Similarly, personality cannot be the source of evil because morality alone is an incentive.¹² The source of evil, thus, should lie in our predisposition to humanity, which comprises “a self-love which is physical and yet *involves comparison* (for which reason is required); that is to say, we judge ourselves happy or unhappy only by making comparison with others.”¹³ The ‘comparative’ nature of human reason stems from the fact that it evaluates an individual's satisfaction based only on how they compare to other rational beings who also make choices and seek happiness. This self-love gives rise to the desire to be valuable in other people's concern. According to Kant, this starts out as just a wish to be on level with others, but with time it becomes "an unjustified need to acquire such superiority for oneself over others" due to our fear that others may try to take advantage of us.¹⁴ It is from this that the greatest vices of hidden or overt animosity toward everyone we perceive as foreign to us can be grafted, namely, competition and jealousy. Therefore, our desire for happiness—which gives rise to the concept of a universal good that includes all of our

⁹ *Ibid*, p.373.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.381.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.372.

¹² *Ibid*, p.373.

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

impulses—is a creation of logical humans rather than an animal instinct. Its primary purpose is to enable us to make competitive self in comparison with another. This is an unsociable propensity since it pushes us to strive for unfair supremacy over other people who are our equals in terms of reason. In the fourth proposition of the “*Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent*”¹⁵, Kant claims that within this basic relation of interdependency, there is a stimulating desire to be dependent on others (for the purpose of feeling confident than them), in addition to a drive to act in an unsociable way, cross people, and separate oneself from them. We want honor, power, and fortune through unsociable sociality—that is, dominance over others based on their viewpoint, their desire, or their fear. These three things are the matters of social passions, or our impulses that are hard to rationalize away.¹⁶ In the “*Critique of Practical Reason*”, *Unsociable Sociability* appears as *self-conceit*, meaning thereby that, it is to regard our impulses as legislative rather than the moral rule of reason, placing a higher value on ourselves than our adherence to the moral law. In his words, “...our nature as sensuous being so characterized that the material of the faculty of desire (objects of the inclination, whether of hope or fear) first presses upon us; and we find our pathologically determined self, although by its maxims it is wholly incapable of giving universal laws, striving to give its pretensions priority and to make them acceptable as first and original claims....This propensity to make the subjective determining grounds of one’s choice into an objective determining ground of the will, in general, can be called self-love; when it makes itself legislative and an unconditional practical principle, it can be called self-conceit.”¹⁷

The progress of our logical powers in society is inevitably accompanied by the unsociable sociality that is inherent in human nature. One way to interpret the Christian story of temptation & salvation is as a struggle between the moral precept and the idea that morality should yield to desire. The narrative of the sin of Adam and his banishment from Eden is told in the biblical narrative of the Fall. This story serves as a metaphor for how moral principles can give way to primal impulses.¹⁸ But Christianity also leaves for the way of redemption. As Kant argues, “For man, therefore, who despite a corrupted heart possesses a goodwill. There remains a hope of a return to the good from which he has strayed.”¹⁹ One interpretation of the Adamic

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent*, translated by Carl J. Friedrich, from *The Philosophy of Kant*, edited with an Introduction by Carl J. Friedrich (New York: The Modern Library, 1977), p.120.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp.120-21.

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, (1956), *Critique of Practical Reason*, translated by Lewis White Beck, (New York: Liberal Arts Press), p. 77

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, (1793), *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Op Cit, p. 391

¹⁹*Ibid*, p. 392.

Myths' story of temptation and redemption is as a representation of the interplay among morality, knowledge, and freedom. If the myth of the Fall is understood as a story that symbolically symbolizes our perception of evil as freely chosen but still rejectable, it can be rehabilitated rather than rejected.²⁰

But why does Kant refer to the role of Holy texts or scripture? Probably, the reason is that he sees scripture as a symbol of morality, and he asserts that “reason can be found not only to be compatible with scripture but also at one with it.”²¹ He emphasizes the value of scripture by saying that we should look for a morally instructive message in its tales. As he says, “Since...the moral improvement of men constitutes the real end of all religion of reason, it will comprise the highest principle of all Scriptural exegesis.”²²

According to Kant, evil is consequently a byproduct of human reason operating within the social context that allows for its optimal development. The social aspect of the solution is found in the solidarity of people who come together to build moral communities.

The source of evil, Kant concludes, is *social*. The struggle against it, he argues, if it is to be effective, must therefore also be social. According to Kant, if we view the fight against evil as an individualistic one, with each isolated person valiantly battling against his or her own proclivity for evil, then we are only creating a mechanism for the disconcerting collapse of morality. In his final two books of the *Religion*, Kant reiterates and emphasizes this anti-individualistic thesis on the fight against evil, arguing that “...we have a duty which is *sui generis*, not of men towards men, but of the human race toward itself. For the species of rational beings is objectively, through the idea of reason, destined for a social goal, namely, the promotion of the highest good as a social good.”²³ He further says, “...the highest good cannot be achieved merely by the exertion of the single individual toward his own moral perfection, but instead requires a union of such individuals into a whole working toward the same end – a system of well-disposed human beings, in which and through whose unity alone the highest moral good can come to pass.”²⁴

²⁰ Onorra O’Neill, ‘Kant on Reason and Religion’, *The Tanner Lecture on Human Values*, Delivered at Harvard University, April 1-3, 1996, pp.295-96.

²¹ Immanuel Kant, (1793), *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Op Cit, Preface to the Second Edition.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ *Ibid*, Book Three, p.407.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

Part-II

Predisposition to Goodness through Establishing an Ethical Community

The moral assessment of human beings is the estimation of our dispositions, which Kant considers are mainly the outcome of our choices. But these choices are conditioned by certain predispositions towards good and tendencies toward evil that when reflected together, assist in clarifying in more detail the unsociable sociability in human beings. These inclinations and dispositions are particular to humans and essential to them. They are inseparable from humanity and cannot be eradicated.²⁵ Kant asserts that we are inherently good. This predisposition to goodness can be found through establishing an ethical community; which may result in eradicating evil in human nature. But the question arises: Why does Kant consider battling evil in human nature through an ‘ethical community’? He will answer that through the establishment of an ethical community, we may assume, postulate, *and hope* for the likelihood of introducing moral purpose into the society. According to O’Neill, “This bare structure of hope—the canon of hope—can be expressed in a range of vocabularies whose permissible articulations of hope will be accessible to different people, who may hope for varying conceptions of grace or of progress that might bridge the gap between moral intention and empirical outcomes.”²⁶ Behind this variety of hopes, lies a common commitment to action-social as well as individual. This commitment to action lies in the persuasion of the greatest good (*summum bonum*) in our life, and accordingly, it is also our victory of *good* over *evil* principles. Kant writes, “As far as we can see, therefore, the sovereignty of the good principle is attainable, so far as men can work towards it, only through the establishment and spread of a society in accordance with, and for the sake of, the laws of virtue, a society whose task and duty it is to rationally impress these laws in all their scope upon the entire human race. For only thus can we hope for a victory of the good over the evil principle.”²⁷

According to Kant, a union of men under merely moral laws may be called an ethical society.²⁸ It is that society, which we need to struggle against evil is one that “progressively organizes” all human beings so that they gradually become a cosmopolitan community of this kind. Kant also names this sort of society an ‘ethical community’ or ‘ethical commonwealth’.

²⁵ Christopher Arroyo, (2017), “Such Crooked Timber: Kant’s Philosophical Anthropology,” *Kant’s Ethics and the Same Sex Marriage Debate-An Introduction*, Springer International Publishing, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-55733-5, P. 54.

²⁶ Onora O’Neill, ‘Kant on Reason and Religion’, *The Tanner Lecture on Human Values*, Op Cit, p. 304.

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, (1793), *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Op Cit, Book Three, p.404.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Using the four headings from Kant's table of categories, Allen Wood illustrates the four characteristics of an ethical community.²⁹

Quality (one of the incentives for participating in it): *Purity*, based only on the rational and moral incentives of reason

Quantity (of the community itself): *Unity*, ensured by the universality of its extent

Modality: *Unchangeableness* (of its constitution), but independence and honesty of its mode of administration.

Relation (between its members): *Freedom* acknowledges the absence of coercive government, whether it comes from a legal state or a group of authorities inside the ethical society.

Kant argues that the ideal way to conceptualize the ethical society is as "a people of God" administered by the moral principles of virtue. He makes a distinction between the author of a law, whose will enforces the duty to observe it, and the legislator, who gives an order and may inflict positive or negative consequences. Kant argues that the idea of the rational will of every rational being as such is the only thing that can be regarded as the author of a moral law. However, if the moral law is to be considered a public law, meaning that it applies to a real community of humans, then only God's will can be considered the appropriate legislator. As members of a moral community with God as its governing authority, we ought to regard our duties as mandates from above.³⁰

According to Kant, doubts about whether or not the summum bonum can actually be achieved will inevitably arise. However, he believes that we can overcome these doubts by having faith in God as the ultimate legislator and world governor, whose perfect will, absolute power, and highest knowledge make the greatest good possible. In his words, "The idea of the highest good, inseparably bound up with the purely moral disposition, cannot be realized in man himself...yet he discovers within himself the duty to work for this end. Hence he finds himself impelled to believe in the cooperation or management of a moral Ruler of the world, by means of which this goal can be reached. And now there opens up before him the abyss of a mystery regarding what God may do..., whether indeed *anything* in general, and if so, *what* in particular should be ascribed to God."³¹

²⁹ Allen Wood, "Religion, Ethical Community and the Struggle Against Evil," quoted from [http://www.stanford.edu/~allenw/webpapers/Ethical Community.doc](http://www.stanford.edu/~allenw/webpapers/Ethical%20Community.doc), retrieved on 15/07/16.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Immanuel Kant, (1793), *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Op Cit, p.408.

However, the idea of the ethical commonwealth dwindles markedly in man's hands. Therefore, Kant holds that we must hold a *visible church* to guarantee our moral aspirations.

Part-III

Church and the Ecclesiastical Faith

Kant's idea of an ethical community is based on institutions of organized religion, particularly in the Christian church. According to him, "An ethical commonwealth under divine moral legislation is a *church* which, so far as it is not an object of possible experience, is called the *church invisible*, a mere idea of the union of all the righteous under direct and moral divine world-government, an idea serving all as the archetype of what is to be established by men. The *visible church* is the actual union of men into a whole which harmonizes with that ideal."³² As far as it is possible for man to bring about the moral kingdom of God on earth, that is the true (visible) church.

The following are the necessities of a visible church³³. They are—

1. *Universality*, and therefore its numerical oneness, requires that it has the quality that, despite being split and holding differing opinions about important matters, it is nevertheless based on such fundamental principles as are required to bring about a general unification in a single church, thus avoiding sectarian divisions.
2. Its *nature* or quality is *purity*, that is, a union liberated from the absurdity of superstition and the craziness of fanaticism, and driven only by moral principles.
3. Its *relation* to the freedom principle; the church's external relationship to political authority as well as the internal relationships among its members, both of which are republican in nature. Thus, there can be neither hierarchy nor illuminatism, which is a form of special inspiration democracy in which an individual's inspiration might vary from another's at their discretion.
4. Its *modality*, "the *unchangeableness* of its constitution, with the exception that incidental rules pertaining to its administration alone may be altered in accordance with time and situation; to this aim, it must already have *a priori* established principles in the concept of its goal within it.

³² *Ibid*, p.410.

³³ *Ibid*.

An ethical commonwealth in the shape of a church serves as a mere *representative* of a city of God and is based on a set of fundamental ideas that are unlike those found in a political constitution because it is not democratic or *monarchical* under a patriarch or pope, nor is it *aristocratic* under bishops and other prelates (as of sectarian *Illuminati*). The best way to explain it is as a family or household headed by a common, yet invisible, moral Father whose Holy Son” understands His will while still having a blood relationship with every member of the household.³⁴

Additionally, every church's constitution stems from a Historical (Revealed) Faith, also known as Ecclesiastical Faith; this is best communicated through a Holy Scripture. According to Kant, “the authority of scripture...as...*at present* the only instrument *in the most enlightened portion of the world* for the union of all men into one church, constitutes the ecclesiastical faith, which, as the popular faith, cannot be neglected, because no doctrine based on reason alone seems to the people qualified to serve as an unchangeable term.”³⁵ He also further says, “It is also possible that the union of men into one religion cannot feasibly be brought about or made abiding without a holy book and an ecclesiastical faith based on it.”³⁶

The foundation of ecclesiastical faiths is a biblical authority that is protected and interpreted by a hierarchy of priests and specialized scholars. By various disreputable means, including fervent claims to mystical insight or empirical divine revelation, superstitious fears, fetishistic attempts to use fictitious magic and sorcery or petitionary prayers to obtain divine assistance or favor, and the "counterfeit service" (Afterdienst) of God through various morally bankrupt rituals and mandatory observances, their "priestcraft" (Plaffentum) rules over minds of people. Kant believed that the historical responsibility of defeating good against evil had been given to organized religion. He looks forward to the day when the true religious kernel emerges from this empirical shell, throws off its fetishistic and superstitious attachments, does away with "the humiliating separation between people and clergy," and approaches the state of a true ethical community.

Concluding Remarks

This essay's aim is to explain Kant's theory of human nature's unsocial sociability and how the formation of an ethical community might help to overcome it. Unsocial sociability, sometimes known as the predisposition to radical evil in human nature, refers to people's inclination to join a society but also to actively fight it, posing a persistent threat to its dissolution. According to Kant, evil is a byproduct of human

³⁴ *Ibid*, p.411.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p.412.

³⁶ *Ibid*.

reason operating within the social context that fosters its optimal development. The solution also lies in the social realm, where we may think of the unity of human beings forms an ethical society. According to Kant, we might assume, conjecture, and expect that moral meaning can be introduced into the universe and that our inclinations toward goodness can be realized through the creation of an ethical community.